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The Evangelical BasisOF.... Membership

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THE EVANGELICAL BASIS OF MEMBERSHIP.

The "Evangelical Basis" or "Test of Membership" refers to a clause in the Constitutions of all Young Women's Christian Associations connected with the International Association, which provides that all active, that is, voting and office-holding members, shall consist of young women, members in good standing in Protestant Evangelical Churches.

Its use explained. While this clause is found in every constitution, it does not, as many have understood or inferred, debar any young woman of good moral character from membership in or the privileges of the Associations. It does not "*limit*" but *classifies* the membership according to its duties and privileges. The non-Christian young woman who is reaching up toward a broader and better womanhood is just as welcome as the Christian young woman, but the Association has no right to place upon her the responsibilities for Christian duties in which she has no experience; hence it has created the Associate membership which grants all the privileges of all departments equally to

all, while it places upon its Active members alone, the responsible duties of maintaining the true Christian character and work of the Association. Nor does this leave the Associate member in a mere nominal relation to the Association; it opens to her all the advantages of the physical department, gymnasium, baths, lectures, outing clubs; the social life and fellowships; the educational advantages of the class room, reading room and library, literary and other improvement circles, lectures, concerts, entertainments; all the mutual aids along economic lines and a welcome to the hours of Bible study, prayer and song. All in fact that any member receives she may enjoy, but the Association does not require her to give of that which she does not possess, and does not conceal the fact that it hopes by the personal ties of fellowship and friendship formed, to lead every Associate member into a personal friendship with Jesus Christ.

Some reasons for holding to this basis. Every organization which hopes to accomplish a definite object must have an Active membership that is in sympathy with and willing to work aggressively for that object. The limitations therefore put upon the Active membership must be determined by the object of the organization and the character of the work to be accomplished by it.

The object of this Association as stated in the

Preamble to the constitutions handed down to us by the founders of the organization is "to stimulate interest in Evangelical religion among young women, and to improve their intellectual, social and physical condition by means of an association of young women." A Young Women's Christian Association therefore, having this for its object, must not only have a majority of young women, but of Christian, evangelical Christian young women, in its Active membership, and the responsibility of directing its work so as to accomplish this definite object must rest upon them. It can and does at the same time invite all young women to fellowship, to enjoy the vast number of privileges, to *association* with them in an "Associate" membership and still accomplish its purpose.

But who is to decide what women are evangelical Christians and who are not? Shall we set up a Creed and have a Committee of Examination on the qualifications for membership? No, that would be to make us a sect or independent church, while we are but an arm of the evangelical churches, doing a special work. Why not let each applicant for membership decide the question for herself and let the mere fact of her desire to join the Association decide upon her Christian faith and purpose? In the first place the term Christian has too many interpretations to admit of this; an unbeliever

may call himself a Christian by reason of residence in a so-called Christian country, in distinction to a Mohammedan or heathen land. Again, many unwilling to surrender the heart to Jesus Christ as the only way to eternal salvation, try to satisfy conscience by engaging in charitable and philanthropic work, such in their desire for activity would naturally strive for leadership and we would soon have the form of the Christian organization without the spirit thereof.

The fact therefore that we must have some method of discriminating, in order to preserve the evangelical character of the work, and that a personal judgment on the part of the Association or the applicant for membership would be unsatisfactory, has led the Association to adopt the evangelical church membership of Active members, as a basis which conserves the highest interests of the work, in no wise limits the wide scope of practically helpful agencies along the so called secular lines, making these but the more efficient, is just to all members alike, preserves the interdenominational character of the Association and encourages loyalty to the church, of which the Association is a helpful organic part. In joining a church, people publicly avow their faith and doctrines, the majority of Christians in the Scriptural sense of the term are in the evangelical churches, and hence among these the Association will be most

likely to find a majority of those women who are suited to the work of "stimulating an interest in evangelical religion among young women."

The insufficiency of other bases. Other conditions of membership have been suggested, but each seems lacking in some essential point. As examples of these, first: "Admit all women to equal membership." This defeats not only any definite Christian object, but any object whatever, as there would be as many ideas of what work ought to be done as members in the organization. Even though the Constitution outlines a plan of organization, this could be entirely changed by vote of a majority. One Association organized on this basis, while still calling itself a Young Women's Christian Association, grew into a school for the teaching of Christian Science, and had no connection whatever in sympathy or work with the Christian church, and did no form of Association work.

Second: "Admit to Active membership all women of good moral character." This would do if the object were given up and the name changed to Young Women's Moral or Philanthropic Association, but contains no ground for the name Christian, as the majority of all the members may be non-Christian. Again the term "good moral character" is not easily defined. An unbeliever in Christ may possess a moral

character, but who would consider such an one a suitable leader in a Christian Association?

Some have suggested in connection with both of the above plans to have the Constitution read in this "broad" way and then quietly control the matter so that only good Christians should have office or power, thus diffusing a Christian spirit and work while the non-Christians feel that they are sharing equally in membership. In the first place, who is to become responsible for this matter of quiet control? May not some unholy ambition thwart the ability to do this, or may not death remove the leader, and then what protection will the Association have? Again is it honest to say that all have equal right in matters of control and then secretly to withhold that right? Is it not quite doubtful if a Christian organization which conceals its Christian principles and life ever really wins a soul to Christ? Is it not better to make a clear, kindly distinction, and will it not appear reasonable to all right-minded people that a Young Women's Christian Association organized for Christian work and to be actuated by the Christ spirit, should be directed by those who belong to Christ's body, the Church?

Third: "Admit any Christian woman to membership." This immediately involves us in the difficulty noted above, of deciding who are Christian women, if the term Christian is to have any real significance at all. Again this,

with all the preceding forms, renders an Associate membership superfluous. If only Christian women are to be admitted, where is the field for influencing the great body of non-Christian young women except by regarding them as the charitable beneficiaries of this Christian membership. This leaves no place in the membership for the vast army of independent, aspiring and self-respecting young women who are outside the pale of the Christian church to enjoy the practical privileges, in fellowship with the Active members, and to be led up to the Christian life.

Fourth: "Admit all to Active membership, but require the Board of Managers to be selected from evangelical church members." This plan immediately confirms the wisdom of the evangelical basis, but provides no way of assuring its continued use. By correct Parliamentary usage, all the Active members in an organization have equal right to vote and office, in many States incorporation could not be obtained without this provision. It is legally in the power of the Active membership at any time to provide that any Active member, whether church member or not, may hold office. This plan also makes possible a non-Christian Committee system, separating the work into secular and religious departments, instead of having the whole pervaded by strong Christian influence and spirit.

In regard to all these suggested forms, there may be no reason why they would not serve for general charitable or philanthropic organizations, but surely not if the Association desires through the physical, social, business and educational departments to reach up to the highest standards of Christian life and service. It were as reasonable to ask an unbeliever to teach the Bible in Sabbath School as to place a woman, claiming no allegiance to Jesus Christ as a Divine Saviour, in a position of control in an organization designed in its ultimate purpose to lead young women to faith in Christ and to train them for aggressive and Christian work. Were our object less positively evangelical, our Active workers might with some degree of propriety be somewhat less evangelical.

The definition of the term evangelical. After stating the terms of Active membership, the Constitutions either in the body or in a foot-note, explain as follows: "We hold those churches to be evangelical, which, maintaining the Holy Scriptures to be the only infallible rule of faith and practice, do believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Father, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in whom dwelleth the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and who was made sin for us though knowing no sin, bearing our sins in His own body on the tree, as the Only Name under

Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved from everlasting punishment."

The question has arisen, why is this doctrinal definition necessary? Because the majority of people considering this basis ask for the definite meaning of the term evangelical. Were there no printed definition each worker would be left to a personal judgment in the matter and the basis might in many centers have no significance whatever, or at least a widely varying application. The Association therefore, believing that some interpretation of this term is essential to any significant application, accepted the wording which had been used by the Young Men's Christian Association in its general organizations since 1869. This was worded for them by a Committee of representatives of the different churches with the late Dr. Howard Crosby as Chairman, and does not include or exclude any churches by their respective names, but expresses the test clearly in Scriptural language.* The fact that the leaders in Y. M. C. A. work, after a long experience, consider this clearly defined basis as one of the vital elements in their growth and perpetuity, and that so far as Christian doctrines are concerned young women do not differ in their needs from

*In the following passages note how closely Scripture language has been followed: 2 Peter i. 20, 21; 2 Tim. iii. 15-17; Matt. iii. 17; John iii. 16; Rev. xix. 16; Col ii. 9; 2 Cor. v. 21; 1 Peter ii. 24; Acts iv. 12; Matt. xxv. 46.

young men, led our workers to feel great confidence in their advice to adopt this definition as essential.

Observations on this definition. First: This is a definition of doctrines found in the published faith of all the evangelical churches and has no references to the beliefs of individual ministers, or members of those churches

Second: We do not require all Active members to avow their belief in all these doctrines in just the same way other members may hold to them; we are striving to make personal judgment in the Association unnecessary. We cannot be responsible for the fact that many church members and even some ministers do not hold to the doctrines of the churches to which they belong, or that others do not seem to know just what doctrines are held by their own churches, hence we simply require that our Active members belong to churches which hold to these doctrines as essential.

Third: It is interesting to compare this definition with the one published by the Evangelical Alliance for the United States, noting that the doctrines emphasized are essentially the same. With the Alliance, too, we can say of our definition as they do of theirs "it being however distinctly declared that this brief summary is not to be regarded in any formal or ecclesiastic sense as a creed or a confession, nor the adoption of it as an assumption of the right

authoritatively to define the limits of Christian brotherhood." It is simply an indication of the class of persons whom it is desirable to embrace within the Association. Furthermore, we do not claim that ours is the best definition that might be given, but it is the best one that has been presented to us and thus far has served every purpose of the Association.

Some questions which have arisen. Isn't this a narrow basis for Christian work? In the light of time and the temporal benefits of the Association alone it might at first seem so, but not with the truth of eternal life before the worker. It is as broad as Jesus Christ and His teachings. Above all the temporal and practical aims, our object is to fit as many young women as can be reached to spend an eternity with Him. "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life," Matt vii. 14.

Doesn't this exclude some good workers? Yes, fortunately and wisely, it excludes from Active membership all who could not harmonize with or consistently labor to advance the main object of the Association; but any young women who desires a better womanhood is welcomed as an Associate member. It is interesting to note that every live Association has a large proportion of Associate members.

In conclusion therefore, let it again be emphasized that our choice of a basis excludes no worthy young woman from membership and

the enjoyment of all privileges in the Association; it limits us in no form of work for and by young women which might be done without this basis; it assures us of the confidence and support of the Church of which we are a part; it enables us to rest assured that the definite Christian character of the work will always be maintained; it makes possible the highest forms of aggressive Christian effort and brings definite results in young women won to the Christian life and trained for active Christian service. While some good charitable and philanthropic work may be done without it, we believe that all forms of physical, social, business and educational work will be better done if planned for and controlled by Christian women and especially if they look up toward and are permeated by the spiritual life.

In adopting this basis, we are looking beyond time to eternity, from the good to the best, from human effort to Divine power, and as our Lord and Master gave us example are endeavoring to minister to each other, as members, in every helpful way, but not forgetting that He taught, "Is not the life more than meat?" "The kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink, but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost."

